This Art is focused on the theme of history and its uses and abuses in today’s design. 

The article by William Curtis argues that the Post-Modernists, often seen as misinterpreting history, effectively show the same claim through popular appeal and copying. Great Modernists like Le Corbusier, Asalto, Kahn, and others had a much more fundamental understanding of history than those who were able to incorporate into their buildings a profound synthesis of old and new. Opposite is a detail of the Pantheon, Athens, fifth century ac.

"It is the proper study and labour of an artist to uncover and find out the latent cause of conspicuous beauty and from thence form principles of his own conduct."

JOHNS H. REYNOLDS

According to current folklore, architecture’s purgatory is now over and paradigms, once lost, are being regained. Modern architecture mimed (we learn) by embracing utopianism, functionalism, abstraction, the notion of "self-gentle and, above all, by spurning tradition. These arts are being absorbed by the derision of functional and structural rigor, the promotion of an ironical view of progress, and a commonwealth of historical references and images. There has been much talk about conventions and codes, and about the need to communicate on everyday as well as abstruse levels. Old idealist doctrines have been served up in new semiotic bottles.

So, evidence is slight that forms chieft inchrome acanthus leaves communicate better to the man in the street than did their naked predecessors: little is done to explain why one tradition rather than another would be more relevant to the present; and in eclecticism not much discrimination is made between clever collisions and cogent wholes. The critical line between thin pastiche and genuine invention rooted in past principle is rarely drawn.

Despite repeated exorcisms, the forbidden "Modernism" cannot be banished altogether; it remains to haunt people with doubts. Perhaps it is not possible to wake up one morning and gain control of the Classical orders; to evade the stylistic traditions of the immediate past; to pretend that one’s roots lie elsewhere. Perhaps Modernism is not such an anti-historical monster after all. One looks in vain for a cultural situation that would make the revival of Classical antiquity compelling. Yet columns and pediments proliferate. The question of tradition —its use and abuse—is ripe for closer scrutiny.

To begin with, there is the ritual incantation that Modernism (a month embracing the peaks of formal poetry and the depths of speculative building) involved the complete rejection of the past. This historical misconception serves the purpose of inflating recent revivalist exercises. But it is scarcely an adequate description of the varied views of tradition entertained by Wright, Behrens, Perret, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Terragni, Asalto, and Kahn—to mention only a few. While these artists articulated their forms from those of nineteenth-century eclecticism, and while their apologists (eg. Pewrner, Giedion, Hitchcock) pushed the idea of an entire new style, they actually drew on history in a number of ways which informed the anatomy and underlying formal structure of their designs. Wright deserves to be taken seriously when he speaks of the "Cage Conservatoire... that law and order inherent in all great architecture" and Le Corbusier, it should not be forgotten, spoke of history as his only real master, drawing inspiration from Greek temples as well as walls, silos and cars.

What these artists managed to do was absorb primary lessons from their sources whether vernacular or monumental, then to transform these into vocabularies adjusted to the contemporary world.

To the question of tradition within the Modern Movement I shall return; for the moment the aim is to cast a critical eye over recent fashions in form and ideology, and to try to separate the symbols from the authentic. The customary battle between caricatures—the tedious Modern/Post-Moderndebate—can surely be avoided. To assert that an assemblage of concrete Doric columns or coloured plywood plasters is somehow automatically superior to a building using pilaster or steel frame structures, or to assert the exact opposite, is to reduce criticism to a pretty silly level: fashion versus old habits. A longer critical perspective is necessary which seeks out precisely those qualities that transcend more stylistic usage. One needs to cut through the paleolithic advertising and come to terms with the context, order and impetus of the individual work, its resolutions or irresolutions, its depth or shallowness of expression. Few indeed are the buildings in which idea, form and technique are so fused into an indivisible unity that it becomes impossible to remove any one element without destroying both its individual significance and the life of the whole; few are the works of art that crystallise a particular cultural or institutional situation yet address fundamental human and moral questions as well. Such buildings blend modern and ancient as if there were no real difference and touch our deepest imaginative stirrings through the direct impact on the senses of light, space, proportion, form and a sublime sense of order... We are talking, of course, about great architecture, that reduces all 'isms' to insignificance; little wonder that contemporary polemics do not grasp that nettle—almost